

PROFESSOR PRATT, CRITICAL REALISM, AND THE MAN OF COMMON SENSE.

BY JOHN EDMOND HEARN.

IS it possible to make philosophy understood by him who runs while reading? Runs, that is, in the sense that a clock runs; does not cease to operate; works union hours, has three meals a day, sleeps nights. Is it possible, without giving up business, to learn what all the Deep Thinking is for?

James Bissett Pratt, Professor of Philosophy in Williams College, seems to think it is. He contributed an essay to the volume of *Essays in Critical Realism* (Macmillan). The other essays are by six other philosophers in six other colleges.

Common sense, says Pratt, is merely primitive philosophy.

So David Harum, Mrs. Wiggs, and Abe Lincoln are primitive philosophers.

The snap judgments of common sense are often wrong. We are told that they must be corrected in view of the facts of error and illusion and the differences between the data of different perceivers and between those of the same perceiver at different times.

Common sense is good enough, then, only if one is not a serious thinker or has begun to think at all.

Modern philosophy, like modern science, is the result of a slow development. Modern philosophers should be allowed the right to ridicule the earlier thinkers. The more they ridicule the more interesting they become to laymen.

"Descartes," according to Pratt, "discovered that by a great effort he could succeed in doubting everything except the immediate content of his own consciousness. Thereupon, by a still greater effort, he deduced God from the fact of his idea of God; and, having secured God, he succeeded eventually in recreating the world."

The dualistic view of mind and its objects was common among philosophers up to the time of Descartes. He queered it, as the vulgar say.

Still, he was the champion dualist till John Locke arrived. Descartes was willing to accept the content of his own mind as real; but Locke would take only a part of that content—"the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnance, of any of our ideas"—as knowledge.

Berkeley followed Locke, and it was Berkeley who in a peculiar sense broke down the walls of the "Lockian prison." Locke said that we could not know the outer world. Very well, Berkeley said, there is no outer world to be known; there is nothing real except ideas, which are God-inspired.

Kant would have none of "der gute Berkeley's" idealism, and so returned to the dualism of Descartes and Locke, which he made absolute. Kant said that between the real and the unknowable there is an impassable gulf.

The neo-Kantians espoused an objective idealism which resembled Berkeley's subjectivism; for them, Kant's world of things-in-themselves was abolished.

"Realism," says Pratt, "had led to scepticism because of the exaggerated dualism of Descartes, Locke, and Kant.

The neo-realists, who appeared at the beginning of the present century, claimed that we are not shut off from the real by our ideas; we know things directly; ideas do not intervene; there are no ideas. "Knowledge is not a relation between a knowing subject and an object known. It is merely a special sort of relation between objects. And since objects may thus be known directly, there is no longer any danger of agnosticism."

What are you thinking of when you are thinking of a dead man? Locke's answer could only be that you are thinking of the idea of the man dead. The neo-realist would have to say that one's present concept somehow is the man himself altho he is dead, not present but past. The modern philosophy of critical idealism maintains that the object of one's thought is exactly the man himself. The concept is not the object of thought but the means of thinking—one of the tools required for conceiving the object.

The quality-group, according to critical realism, is not the object of perception but the means by which one perceives. This is the chief point of difference between critical realism and the two other forms of realism, those of Locke and the neo-realists.

If we perceive only our perceptions, as Locke held, we are "imprisoned within our ideas."

Pratt makes the neo-realists out as rather absurd with his example of yesterday's headache. If the object of thought must actually be present, in thinking of yesterday's headache one's head would ache today.

It seems that the fallible kind of perception and knowledge involved in critical realism is exactly the kind of perception and knowledge which we really have. To that extent, necessarily, critical realism is agnostic; it does not know everything.

The task of the epistemologist, says Pratt, is to expound the conditions of knowledge actually obtaining in the "somewhat unsatisfactory world we have to live in."

Idealism, pragmatism, and neo-realism are philosophical systems made to order with a view to "avoiding agnosticism." Consequently, they fail to apply "to such very fallible beings as we."

Critical realism, says Pratt, "does not pretend to provide us with a bell that rings when we are right or a whistle that blows when we are wrong."

To sum up the system, it holds that physical entities exist independently of being known; that they may be the mind's object but not its content; that they differ in some respects from the quality-groups of our perception, but that they are so related to our percepts that science may investigate some of their relations to our percepts and to each other, and thus gain trustworthy knowledge.

That is not agnosticism.